

THE TALE OF THE LITTLE DANCING SLIPPER MAKER AND HIS WIFE

THEY have gone away now, those neighbors of mine, the little shoemaker who made the dancing slippers and his pretty wife. They never let me know. They never said good-bye, perhaps because we had never spoken, but one morning I looked out of my kitchen window and there was their flat below sad and empty, the windows staring up at me like hollow eyes.

They lived there a year across from me, and I rejoiced in them, and then to go away without telling me good-bye!

They had comforted me, too. Whenever I wearied of the wrangling of the court of a hundred windows, giving upon my den, I went into my kitchen and looked down at them for comfort.

He was anything but pretty, short, squat, nearly bald, almost misshapen; but she was pretty as a picture, standing in her kitchen by the tubs, peeling potatoes, getting some dainty morsel ready for the shoemaker to eat, standing there in her short ruffled skirt and her little pink kimono in her gem of a kitchen.

He sat in the little back room, the long narrow window of the bathroom between them. He sat at a table in a thin vest in the Summer time covered by his leather apron, in the Winter with a light coat on, sat there working all day long and sometimes into the night, sewing the dancing slippers, turning them, finishing them, and standing them in rows on the table before him so that I could sometimes see the toes, sometimes the whole slipper.

Graceful high-heeled satin and kid slippers of various shapes and sizes and colors, pink, light blue, light green, elephant's breath, and mouse colored. Some were white, too.

Once I took pains to go to the front door of that building and there on a sign I read his name, under it in nice gilt letters:

"Dancing slippers."

I think they were about the happiest

couple I ever saw, she keeping the flat so lovely for him, he working for her. Now and then he went out to deliver the slippers. Then, after the kitchen work was done, she would take a hand herself at stitching the slippers, her sweet face very serious as she stitched away, careful not to take a wrong stitch that might give him more trouble than assistance, stitching loving thoughts of him into the slippers as he stitched thoughts of her.

Sometimes when I saw her so careful to please him, so wrapped up in him, so lovely, laying her small hand on his shoulder as he sat at work, or bringing a big pillow and kneeling by him so that he might perhaps stop in the middle of a stitch to turn and kiss her—I have seen him do it—I have wondered why she hadn't married a handsomer man.

I have found it in me to regret that so much beauty was wasted on a man so small, short, square, and misshapen.

Then I consoled myself with the thought that a handsomer man mightn't have worked for her so patiently. He might have gone out gallivanting about instead of working, or taken her up on the roof to beat her, as the man on the fourth floor across in the court of a hundred windows did his wife.

Whenever I was forced to witness this tragedy I turned for comfort to my dancing slipper maker and his wife.

All went well there, too, until one day a wonderful creature of another world came into the flat, very chic, very stylish, evidently of the magic theatrical world, for all I knew a chorus girl of grand opera.

At any rate, she was a dream in a gown, of the latest cut, in a hat of the latest fashion, marvelous shoes, marvelous gloves, a voluminous dotted veil through which her great eyes gleamed glowwormlike.

She had come to order some dancing slippers especially made. She took her seat in the little, half-dark room. The

shoemaker knelt deferentially, took off her shoe, placed her small foot on a piece of paper, and drew a line about it, taking her measure.

He stood deferentially when this was done and watched the radiant creature sweep out of the room, leaving it darker than ever, leaving the memory of her fatal presence there.

The little shoemaker sat absorbed in thought after she was gone, the slip of paper upon which was the print of her small foot on the table before him.

His pretty wife stood off looking at him. She went into the next room by and by, brought a big pillow and placed it on the floor. She was about to kneel on it as usual, waiting for a kiss, when he said, I heard it from the window:

"Go away! Don't bother me now," and pushed her aside.

I saw her rise and stand by him wonderingly, tears in her eyes, then I heard her say:

"She is very beautiful, isn't she?"

And he answered absentmindedly, his eyes on the magic print of her little foot:

"Yes. Very, very beautiful!"

Then the wife disappeared from the room and a moment after I saw her come into the kitchen and stand there hopelessly, staring at the wall.

Then all was changed in the flat below me across the area. There was no wrangling as in the flats across in the court of a hundred windows. There would never be that. No matter what the pretty wife did, he would never take her on the roof as one takes a rug and beat her. No matter what he did she would never scratch him in the eyes.

But there was no more singing at her work. There was no more gayety. Absorption on the part of the shoemaker to the extent that I more than once saw him push her away, and sadness on the part of the wife as she stood at the tubs getting his dinner and thinking how his

thoughts that went into the stitches were now no longer of her but of the stranger.

Looking down from the point of vantage of a kitchen window, you see how things are much better than those who are participating.

She, seeing before him always the footprints of the stranger on the slip of paper, was sure that it fascinated him to the point of following it. She dreaded the day when he must deliver the slippers and see her again. She thought he took unusual pains with the slippers because this beautiful creature was to wear them.

While he, poor little misshapen fellow, was only doing his best to make the slippers so beautiful so as to get more orders from the stranger and her friends. Doing it to buy more lovely things for his wife, who spent her time in keeping his small home beautiful for him, thinking how he could surround her with many comforts from the sale of these slippers to new people. How he could buy her pink kimonos by the dozen and handkerchiefs and bric-a-brac for her flat. Sat there stitching thoughts of her as of old into the slippers and never a thought of the beautiful stranger.

I grew provoked at her, seeing her standing there so hopelessly, nursing a phantom, the potatoes unpeeled, the soup not yet on, no sign of preparations for dinner, and the clock on St. Mark's steeple striking the hour of 4!

More and more provoked until I saw her all at once press her little hands to her face and burst into uncontrollable sobs.

You know what usually happens to peacemakers? Impossible, then, to call the little shoemaker and ask him to go to her!

But not impossible to rivet his attention upon myself, so that, seeing me look steadfastly and sorrowfully into the kitchen window, he must know that something was going on there that he should know.

And this was what I did.

The sunlight was on my window and my hair and on the white dress I wore. Impossible for him to refrain from looking up out of his dark room at me if I stood there long enough, looking down.

I stood patiently for some minutes, then he glanced up. I could see it out of the tail of my eye.

He had no sooner done so than he put down the slipper, sprang up, and ran around to the kitchen to find her standing there sobbing, sobbing as if her little heart would break.

I left the window, but not until I had seen him take her in his arms and kiss her and kiss her.

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At six o'clock I went back into my kitchen to get a bite of dinner, and saw the completion of the reconciliation. The shoemaker was putting the finishing touches on the slippers. His wife knelt on the big pillow by his side, and in spite of the heat at the close of the day he did not push her away.

The last stitch was taken. The slippers were finished.

He placed them on the table together, and they looked at them proudly, she smilingly now, without resentment, knowing at last that no thought of the beautiful stranger had entered into the stitches that held them together—only thoughts of her.

How beautiful they were! Fashioned, turned, and stitched with loving thoughts of her!

Yes. She could trust him to go and see that beautiful stranger and take her the slippers, knowing that they had been stitched with loving thoughts of her.

He turned and looked at her. Then as she knelt so happily by his side on the big pillow I saw him bend, as of old, that misshapen shoemaker with the bald spot as halo, and kiss her.